

Detroit artists use city's blight as their canvas

By MIKE HOUSEHOLDER (AP) – Dec 15, 2009

DETROIT — Houses with dreary urban facades covered in polka dots. A traveling dollhouse made from the remnants of abandoned homes. A dilapidated residence covered in ice.

Artists across the Detroit area are using the city's blight as their canvas, transforming abandoned homes into high-concept projects to draw attention to the homelessness, poverty and urban decay plaguing Detroit. They hope the ongoing experiment will shed some creatively inspired light on what Detroit was, is and could be again.

The work harks back to two decades ago when Tyree Guyton transformed a deteriorating Detroit neighborhood into a colorful, outdoor polka-dot art gallery.

Guyton rescued stuffed animals, sneakers and shopping carts from alleys and street corners and gave them a permanent home on the trees, houses and vacant lots of Heidelberg Street. But unlike Guyton's project, this latest wave of social art isn't centered on a single section of the city, and it comes at a time when the problems are just as dire, if not more so: Detroit has tens of thousands of abandoned structures, a budget deficit of at least \$300 million and an unemployment rate two to three times that of the national average.

"It's amazing to see now the work that (Guyton) started 23 years ago kind of taking on shape and form in many different ways with many different people in this city," said Jenenne Whitfield, executive director of the Heidelberg Project.

Famous examples of social art include Spencer Tunick's photos depicting thousands of nude subjects at locations around the world, and Nek Chand's "Rock Garden," a vast sculpture garden in India. But the trend is magnified in Detroit because so many artists are zeroing in on the same subject matter and displaying their creations in high-profile ways.

Clinton Snider is one of those who saw artistic possibilities in Detroit's misfortune. The suburban Bloomfield Township resident typically expresses himself through painting. But these days, he's becoming known as the guy who built a miniature house from the remnants of abandoned homes.

Snider's creation — called House 365 — is touring the area with each "deedholder" hosting the little (about 5 feet tall) wood-framed house for a month at a time. It's currently booked into the middle of next year.

The house, which some mistake for a dollhouse, has become "a symbol for Detroit culture and how much abandonment there is," said Snider, who initially envisioned moving the house every day of the year, hence the name.

Marisa Gaggino, owner of The Heritage Co. II Architectural Artifacts, says she's honored to host Snider's artwork, in part because it symbolizes what she says is the "shocking" economic divide between Detroit and neighboring Oakland County, which houses her business and some of the most affluent communities in the U.S.

Gaggino acknowledges, though, that not all who visit her Royal Oak store grasp the meaning behind the miniature house that sits outside just beyond the entrance.

"The first people that looked at it came in and wanted to know how much it was," she said.

"They thought it would be great to put in their backyard and have it as a playhouse for their little girl."

Richard Gage, who owns a Detroit-area architectural sculpture studio and helped foster the



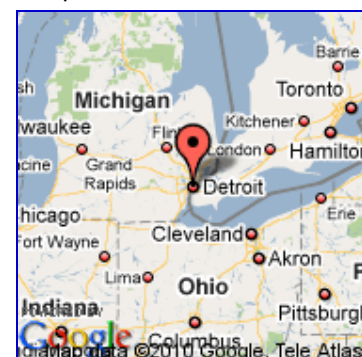
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A scene at the Heidelberg Project in Detroit is seen on Dec. 2, 2009. Two decades ago artist Tyree Guyton transformed a deteriorating Detroit neighborhood into a colorful, outdoor polka-dot art gallery. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio)



Map



House 365 project, says Snider's work elicits many different reactions.

"A lot of people think it's talking exclusively about the current economic situation in Detroit. That's a big percentage of it, but that's not the only thing," Gage said. "Other people have talked about an opportunity for renewal. I had one guy call who was really excited about it but mad that we didn't do it on a big house."

It's unlikely those who see the project planned by New York-based photographer Gregory Holm and architect Matthew Radune will mistake it for anything beyond what it is. They are going to freeze an abandoned home in Detroit this winter, encasing it in ice.

Their goal is to draw attention to the widespread foreclosure problem in the region. They call it Ice House Detroit.

In the spring, crews will salvage what building materials can be reused and demolish the home. The lot will be donated, probably for a community garden.

Other examples of Detroit's growing social art movement include a series of crumbling Detroit houses painted bright orange; the exterior of a building along one of the city's main drags covered in mirror shards and striking colors; and a couple who bought a rundown home for a song and are recruiting artists from around the world to buy foreclosed houses in the neighborhood and rebuild.

Even as social art becomes more common around Detroit, Guyton still is as passionate about his work on Heidelberg Street as he's ever been.

On a recent weekday, with nary a soul around, he was in his element, listening to the radio and working on his latest creations. Guyton spent some time painting an abstract piece, then wandered about, searching for pieces of junk he could transform into art. He settled on a rusted-out car hood and took his paint brush to it.

A minivan pulled up, and its occupants stopped to ask Guyton about Heidelberg and what it all means.

As the vehicle pulled away, Guyton smiled, pleased to know his life's work still is provoking curiosity.

"That's what it's all about," he said.

On the Net:

- Heidelberg Project: <http://www.heidelberg.org>
- House 365 blog: <http://house365.wordpress.com>
- Ice House blog: <http://icehousedetroit.blogspot.com>

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